The problem with the traveller's gaze: Images of the Dark Continent in Paul Theroux's *The Lower River*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the image of Africa presented by Paul Theroux in his travel novel, *The Lower River*. In the analysis of the novel, I argue that Theroux's narrative is a reconstruction of the Western colonizing discourse in contemporary literature. His narrative seeks to construct an image of Africa for the consumption of Western audiences who already exist in an ideological space that has distorted perspectives of Africa as a primitive space. By presenting Africa as a trap for white people and as a place of death, suffering, and superstition, *The Lower River* reinvents the stereotypical image of Africa as the Dark Continent, typical of early colonial travel narratives as well as fiction. Arguing from a theoretical base of Orientalism, the paper asserts that the distorted information relayed through the narrative serves the Occident in its endeavour to construct and dominate Orientals in the process of knowing them. The knowledge that the white protagonist, Ellis Hock, gathers about Africa, in general, and Malawi in particular, becomes crucial in justifying the authority and control that the

West enjoys over Africa. The paper questions the persistence of such presentations of Africa and the West in contemporary literature and treats Theroux's narrative as an endeavour in perpetuating Western dominance over Africa in a neo-colonial fashion.

Keywords: Travel writing, otherness, Orientalism, Dark Continent, imperialism

Introduction

From the backdrop of colonization and its underlying philosophies, African intellectuals have felt the need to challenge the image of Africa in Western discourses by, among other things, interrogating representations about Africa in Western literature. This need took root upon the realisation that, in their colonizing project, Europeans deliberately misrepresented Africa as the Other of Europe – the underdeveloped and chaotic continent in need of white saviours. This, in part, justified their injustice on Africans and, through a crooked sense of logic, vindicated colonization as a necessary evil in Western eyes. For instance, the two accounts that the European explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, wrote in his travels to Africa (*In Darkest Africa* (1890) and *Through the Dark Continent* (1878)) misrepresent Africa as the negative image of Europe and a place with no history. This image of Africa was taken up by novelists and other colonial travel writers, including Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* is challenged and condemned by Chinua Achebe in his landmark essay, "An Image of Africa", as projecting "an image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation" (Achebe, 1977, p. 783).

The unfortunate thing is that, despite such lashing condemnations, this image of Africa did not die with colonialism but has been carried over to this era of neo-colonialism and is very much alive in Western writings about Africa and Africans. Furthermore, this image has been adopted in contemporary African literature by some African writers who have been accused of writing to please foreign audiences whose view of Africa is framed within the lenses of violence and destitution. For example, in his review of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Helon Habila argues that some modern African writers "tend to perform Africa" by pushing an aesthetic of suffering more in a CNN, western

media coverage of Africa. He calls this kind of writing poverty porn – where "images, symbols, and allusions that evoke, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, pity and fear, but not in a tragic sense" are employed in talking about Africa (Habila, 2013, n.p).

This practice in writing has mostly been perpetuated in travel writing about Africa, both fictitious and non-fictitious. As Kevin Dunn rightly observes in his essay, "Fear of a Black Planet: Anarchy Anxieties and Postcolonial Travel to Africa",

> Western travel to Africa frequently exists within scripts drawn from colonial-era representations of Africa and Africans. In the postcolonial era, these scripts and representations have become increasingly contested and under pressure. Thus, the postcolonial travel project is engaged in an act of reifying these discursive constructs. (Dunn, 2004, p. 484)

In contemporary travel fiction, this image of Africa is what we find in Paul Theroux's *The Lower River* (2012). In the novel, Theroux, a prominent American writer, paints an image of modern day Malawi that is deplorable and overtly racist. In *The Lower River*, Theroux begins by introducing us to the protagonist, Ellis Hock, who is about to undergo divorce with his wife. When we meet him in the novel, Hock is an aging man living in America and he often reminisces about the time that he spent in Africa as a young man. In Africa, Hock lived in Malabo, in the lower river district of Nsanje, south of Malawi, then known as Nyasaland. He was involved in charity work and he had helped establish a school in that remote village. After his divorce, he decides to go back to Africa to assist the people that he had left behind when he got a phone call that his father was seriously ill back home. In the novel, Ellis Hock becomes the reincarnation of Albert Shweitzer, the missionary who left his normal life in Europe for a life of service to Africans in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1973).

In my analysis of the novel, I argue that Theroux's narrative is a reconstruction of the Western colonizing discourse in contemporary literature. His narrative seeks to construct an image of Africa for the consumption of Western audiences who already exist in an ideological space that has distorted perspectives of

Africa as a primitive space. By presenting Africa as a trap for the white man and as a place of death, suffering, and superstition, *The Lower River* reinvents the stereotypical image of Africa as the Dark Continent typical of early colonial travel narratives. Arguing from a theoretical base of Orientalism, the paper asserts that the distorted information relayed through the narrative serves the Occident in its endeavour to construct and dominate Orientals in the process of knowing them. The knowledge that the white protagonist, Ellis Hock, gathers about Africa, in general, and Malawi in particular, becomes crucial in justifying the authority and control that the West enjoys over Africa. The paper questions the persistence of such presentations of Africa and the West in contemporary literature and treats Theroux's narrative as an endeavour in perpetuating Western dominance over Africa in a neo-colonial fashion.

In the Western colonizing discourse, there is an underlying assumption that the West has knowledge of those it dominates and it uses this knowledge to exert its force over the colonized and to extend its dominance to new limits. This is why new knowledge of other lands and other people needs to be constantly reproduced in order to replicate the power that the West enjoys over the rest of the world. This relationship between knowledge and power is what Edward Said grapples with in his classic text, *Orientalism* (1978). The basic statement in *Orientalism* is that one can only subdue and control another if one has knowledge about him/her. This is why the West is so obsessed with generating new knowledge about Africa, for example, and presenting such knowledge to its audience in an endeavour to perpetuate dominance. Said argues that "knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control" (Said, 1978, p. 36). As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Alhuwalia (1999) rightly put it, the discourse of Orientalism "constructs and dominates Orientals in the process of knowing them" (p. 49). This is the discourse that needs to be challenged.

Despite the fact that Said uses "the Orient" in reference to certain regions of Asia, his ideas are relevant to the African context since the Western style of colonization is almost the same in both regions. Said defines Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978, p. 3). He describes it as a style of thought based upon an

ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (1978, p. 2). Here "the Occident" is Europe or the West itself and "the Orient" is used to refer to its Others. This distinction between the two spaces is what creates Otherness through notions of "us" and "them". Thus, when Westerners are writing about Africa, they are writing about Others and the distance between the two spaces is clear in the representation and/or misrepresentation of Africa and Africans as the Other land and the Other people, respectively.

In *Orientalism*, Said explains that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (1978, p. 3). The distinction between the "civilized West" and "heathen Africa" that persists in Western writing about Africa today is what gives the West power and privilege over Africa. The message is that Africa must emulate the West as the ideal and that the West must be careful never to go back in time and civilization to resemble benighted Africa. Hence it becomes important to paint the image of backward Africa as a place of underdevelopment, suffering, and as a white man's burden. This gives power to the West while, at the same time, systematically taking it away from Africa. Therefore, European cultural superiority rests on Africa's heathenism as presented through the negative portrayal of the continent in Western discourses.

As such, it becomes the task of the African intellectual to challenge Western ideas about Africa that are ubiquitous in Western literature. African literature and literary criticism therefore become discourses of resistance and representation. They resist the Western stereotypes about Africa and seek to represent Africa to itself and to the West, which denigrates it. As Helen Tiffin points out in "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse",

> it has been the project of postcolonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means through which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. Thus, rereading and rewriting of the European historical and

> fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks. (Tiffin, 1995, p. 96)

This is what this paper attempts to do by interrogating the image of Africa that is presented by Paul Theroux in his travel novel, *The Lower River* and demonstrating how this image serves neo-colonial endeavours.

Into the Dark Continent: The fundamental problem in Theroux's *The Lower River*

Paul Theroux is one of the most critically acclaimed American travel writers. He is a man who spent part of his life in Malawi, sub-Saharan Africa, before the country attained independence from the British, and he also revisited the country after independence. The impact of Theroux's personal experiences on his fiction cannot be overemphasized. As Elton Glaser points out in his essay, "The Self-Reflexive Traveller: Paul Theroux on the Art of Travel and Travel Writing",

> For Theroux, travel and fiction writing are closely related activities…. The connection between travel and fiction is most obvious when we see Theroux draw on his travel experiences to compose his novels. For example, on his journey through the Americas, Theroux visits the Mosquito Coast in Costa Rica, and notes that it is "wild and looks the perfect setting for the story of castaways" …. In a few years of course, Theroux does write his novel about castaways, and calls it *The Mosquito Coast*. (Glaser, 1989, p. 194)

Theroux's habit of relating his real-life experiences in writing fiction is also evident in his semi-autobiographical novel, *My Secret History* (1989), where the protagonist visits and stays in Malawi for quite some time. In the author's note, Theroux acknowledges the impact of his personal experiences on the writing of the novel when he says, "although some of the events and places depicted in this novel bear a similarity to those in my own life, the characters all strolled out of my imagination" (Theroux, 1989). Unlike in *The Lower River*, in this novel Theroux does not go all out to paint a vivid picture of Africa as the undesirable Other of Europe, although minor elements of the author's negative

views of Africa can still be traced in the narrative. The novel has a chapter titled "African Girls", which Theroux dedicates to the narrator's experience in Africa. The opening paragraph of the chapter reads:

> The barefoot student was being led towards my office from the clump of blue-gums, where he had been hiding. But why was he smiling like that? When he came closer I could see his wild eyes did not match his crooked mouth. It was a ganja-smoker's smile – Willy Msemba, at the hemp again. Rain was beaded on his black face…. Not many of the students had hair, not even the girls. It was a head-shaving country, because of the lice. (Theroux, 1989, p. 191)

Already, here, the author's choice of adjectives used to describe the African characters show racial prejudice. One cannot help but question the use of expressions like "crooked mouth", "wild eyes", and "black face" to describe the Africans that the white protagonist meets in the novel. This description of Africans is what has been condemned in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Another error in the narration is the hasty conclusion the narrator makes, that the Africans in the country shaved their heads because of "the lice". This may be a prejudiced assertion as shaving of hair is common and normal among black Africans and in most cases is not as a direct result of some pests as Theroux puts it. Such kinds of expressions run throughout the text but not to the extent that they do in his other novel, *The Lower River*, where Africa, and Malawi in particular, has been presented as a place of suffering, disease, superstition, and as a death-trap for the white protagonist, Ellis Hock.

From the early passages of *The Lower River* when Hock is still in the USA, the memories that he has of Africa already point to the place as the Dark Continent, at once remote and underdeveloped:

> He was sent to a country he'd never heard of, Nyasaland, soon to be the independent Republic of Malawi, and became a teacher at a bush school in a district known as the Lower River. There was something mystical in the name, as though it was an underworld tributary of the River Styx – distant and dark. (Theroux, 2012, p. 6)

This is where we begin to see images of darkness in Theroux's representation of Africa. The comparison between the Lower River and the River Styx compares the two places where these rivers exist and automatically highlighting both as mysterious. By employing the metaphor of the Lower River as "an underworld tributary" of the River Styx (which in Greek mythology is a river which formed the boundary between Earth and the underworld), Theroux emphasizes the primitiveness and mysterious nature of the place (Malawi), which is almost as mythical. The narrator continues by stating that Hock missed Africa, "not the continent, which was vast and unfinished and unfathomable, but his hut in Malabo, on the Lower River in Malawi" (Theroux, 2012, p. 20). His description of Africa as "unfinished and unfathomable" directly contrasts it from Europe which is said to be the first world and evokes the burden that the European bears to develop Africa and make it "fathomable". It is no wonder, therefore, that the West considers it a necessity to provide Africa with development aid, which, unfortunately, propagates Western domination over Africa since attached to such aid are conditions that African countries must abide by. Most of the time, these conditions privilege the West by giving it the power to control.

This questionable presentation of Africa in Western discourses has been noticed by Kevin Dunn (2004) who ascertains that,

> there are at least three discursive images at play within the narrative [about Africa]. The first portrays Africa as a 'primitive paradise' – a land unspoiled by modernisation. Closely associated with this image is the second image of Africa as a zoo. Finally, there is the presentation of Africa as underdeveloped, traditional, and pure. (Dunn, 2004, p. 487-88)

Theroux's narrative falls in this trap and his discourse of Otherness is unmistakably clear when he makes a racist description of Nsanje and its Sena inhabitants in the course of the narrative:

> The Sena people were small, slender, delicate, and violent only when they were bingeing. They did not seem strong, yet they could paddle all day against the current of the river, especially

> when they were fortified by puffs of *chamba*, the local form of marijuana. (Theroux, 2012, p. 32)

Here Theroux repaints his stereotypical image of Africans as chronic drug users that he painted in *My Secret History*. He goes further to say that "Hock stayed almost four [years] – later judged the record for any foreigner in the hot, miserable, bug-ridden, swampy Lower River, among the half-naked Sena people and their procrastinations" (Theroux, 2012, p. 35). Here, the stereotypical representation of Sena people and their land, reifies Hock's perception of the Africans and Africa as antitheses of civilisation and urgency. What is interesting is that the narrator does not go into detail to demonstrate why the Sena people are seen as procrastinators or why their land has been described as "miserable".

As Margaret Hunt (1993) comments, "visitors to Africa inevitably remarked about the nakedness and heathenism character of Africans" (p. 340). This is what Theroux exactly does in *The Lower River*. Hunt argues that this is because "in travel narratives, racist and xenophobic 'truths' work to confirm group values and knit individuals to their preferred community. They titillate authors and readers alike with people and customs just different enough to pleasurably decenter the 'normal'" (Hunt, 1993, p. 340). As such, in his writing, the author reaffirms the image of Africa prevalent in colonial travel writing to propagate the inferiority of Africa and Africans in comparison with the West and Westerners. He is generating knowledge about Africa and Africans in an Orientalist fashion and presenting the same to a Western audience that is bent on dominating Africa through the process of knowing it.

The Africa that we find in Theroux's novel is frozen in time and there is no improvement whatsoever even with the passage of time. Part of the text reads:

> He relaxed, smiling out the window at the low treeless hills, the creases of green in the landscape that marked the foliage along rivers and creeks, the villages that were made visible by the smoke rising from cooking fires. From the air, the place looked just as he had left it almost forty years before. Where else could you go on Earth and say that? (Theroux, 2012, p. 43)

The author paints a deliberate image of Africa as a place of stagnation with no sense of social mobility unlike the West, which is evolving rapidly with time. The narrator tries to justify this stagnation by adding that "Hock felt nothing but gratitude for being in Malawi, thankful that the country still existed, was still sleepy and friendly and ramshackle, that it had welcomed him" (Theroux, 2012, p. 49). Theroux evokes the stereotypical image of Africans as lazy and sleepy to an extent that they fail to develop their own countries. However, although painting an image of sleepy and stagnant Malawi, the narrator contradicts himself when he describes Hock's arrival in Blantyre where,

> He smiled at the well-dressed men gathered at the entrance, the women in bright dresses and high heels, some of the men getting out of expensive-looking private cars, one a Mercedes, another a white Land Rover. In his time, the men would have worn plimsolls, as they called them, and the women would have been barefoot. And no African would have owned a car, much less a Mercedes. (Theroux, 2012, p. 45)

From the description of the people Hock meets in Blantyre, there is evidence of social mobility and that the country has improved with time. This is why his further description of the same country as "sleepy" and "ramshackle" in the course of the narrative is questionable.

Theroux goes on to paint negative images of Africa by, among other things, talking about the "backward" Sena people and their "benighted" village of Malabo where,

> they kill albinos and make them into medicine, and they look for virgins to deflower – cures the AIDS and the pox and heaven knows what, the dreaded lurgy, I fancy, though you'd be very lucky to find a virgin between here [Blantyre] and Karonga. (Theroux, 2012, p. 56)

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the country and the "fact" that you can hardly find a virgin across the country are supposed to be factors pointing to the lecherousness of black men and the licentious nature of black women, as the stereotypes stipulate. Such stereotypes were central in justifying colonization

and the enslavement of Africans from as early as the 1600s. As Alvin Thompson argues, "there was a consensus that [Africans] were generally liars, thieves, venerous, and lecherous …they were irrational, idle, and idolatrous" (Thompson, 1977, p.58). Today, the proliferation of cases of HIV/AIDS in Africa is being justified by the same stereotypes that justified slavery and colonization, as evidenced in the novel. Malawi has been portrayed as a place of moral decadence and the Westerner cannot identify with it. It is the Other land with the Other people who have backward and savage customs. Thus, the knowledge about Africa that Hock is gathering in the story serves to recreate Africa as the other place whose inhabitants need to be controlled.

What is most striking in *The Lower River* is the relationship that exists between Ellis Hock and the African characters that he interacts with in Malabo. The relationship is one of antagonism: that of "the subject" and "the subjected" – "the civilised" and "the heathen". This relationship can be read as a metaphor of the relationship that exists between the West and its Others, in general. The title of the second part of the novel, "The Mzungu at Malabo", automatically sets the protagonist apart from the rest of the inhabitants of the place. He is the *Mzungu* (the white man), the Self, and they are the Others. His greatest joy comes from the fact that the place was still primitive many years after he had left. The narrator says:

> He recognized the flattened landscape at once, a kind of disorder even in the trees and the tall grass, and an odour of dust and smoke. It had been different from anything he'd known, not beautiful, too flat and featureless to photograph, but powerful, his first experience of the world, ancient in its simplicities. (Theroux, 2012, p. 65)

The picture he gives of Africa is that of the exotic place, undisturbed by modernity, "ancient", as he calls it. This echoes the image of Africa we find in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where he describes the land as "the biggest, the most blank, so to speak" (Conrad, 1973, p. 11). This form of narrative satisfies what Kevin Dunn (2004) identifies as the need in Western culture to portray Africa as "a primitive paradise – a land unspoiled by modernisation" for Western consumption (Dunn, 2004, p. 487).

When he embarks for the Lower River, Hock has good intentions of reviving the school he had left behind many years before so that the Africans at least get a basic education. But when he gets there, he realises that the people are not interested in education. The village headman he meets, Festus Manyenga, is not interested in reviving the school but he is rather geared towards reaping off Hock and then selling him away to no man's land, a place that supposedly exists between Malawi and Mozambique. Manyenga is the antithesis of Hock and he represents the general character of Africans in the novel – "greedy and lazy" (Theroux, 2012, p. 108). The narrator says that the villagers were always on the look for hand-outs from Hock. He says:

> He didn't want anything from them but he knew what they wanted from him. Simple enough: an unending supply of kwacha notes. Because the money was so devalued, the denominations of bills so small, even a modest sum, fifty dollars' worth, was a whole big bag full of paper. And along with the need for money was the need for him to be a witness to their distress, or so he thought. They seemed to want to prove to him that they were worthy of this charity. (Theroux, 2012, p. 108)

By portraying the people of Malabo as chronic beggars, Theroux justifies the persistence and need for foreign aid in Africa. It is as if Africans are always looking for charity from Westerners when this may not be the case. The presence of foreign aid in African countries has several dimensions to it and cannot be justified with the assumption that Africans are dependent by nature.

The other unbelievable fact is that, even in this age and time, the Africans are still afraid of the white man. As the narrator puts it, "the village gathered, hanging back. He saw that they were afraid of him – some of the older ones were terrified. Their anxious faces made him self-conscious" (Theroux, 2012, p. 75). Theroux's novel, like other Western travel narratives on Africa, contains overt racism which is unmistakable throughout the text. His description of the places and the people is more racist than it is objective. His narrator speaks:

> Scientists had dreamed or imagined outer space into being and made a reality of space travel. But no one else on Earth ever thought of the Lower River. Malabo was more distant than Mars.

> It was perhaps not all that remote in miles, but it was unknown, so it was at the limit of the world. Because of its isolation it was absurd, fantastic, unreal, a place of the naked and the misshapen… the villagers were unlike anyone he knew… the villagers on this river bank did not look like other people… they didn't walk like other people, or eat or drink like anyone he had ever known. And so, from the beginning he saw that they were different, and what was more disturbing, they saw that he was different – utterly unlike themselves, a visitor from a distant place that was unknown but whispered about, impossibly far, unreachable from here, where they lay buried in their belowground river world. (Theroux, 2012, p. 92)

In the above quotation, the narrator's binary description of Malabo and its people as contrasted from Europe and its inhabitants becomes crucial to the subject at hand. It reads as racist and imperialist since it dehumanizes the villagers who "did not look like other people" and the land which "was perhaps not all that remote in miles, but it was unknown". And in this primitive village, the protagonist, Ellis Hock, has been trapped by the desperate Africans who see him as their saviour. The people elevate and praise him, calling him "Our father, our chief, our *mzungu* in Malabo" (Theroux, 2012, p. 149). He feels claustrophobic and tries to escape but the desperate lot will not let him off.

Lucy Jarosz (1992) mentions that, "contemporary Africa remains the Dark Continent as the site of AIDS and in terms of academic discourse which focusses upon African sexual practices as abnormal, untamed, and dangerous" (p. 112). This presentation of Africa has not been left out in Theroux's narrative. We come across several characters who are suffering from AIDS and the narrator tells us that "in his months in Malabo he'd had intimations of death; in an African village, death was ever present" (Theroux, 2012, p. 321). Hock even comes across an entire village of children whose parents have succumbed to the pandemic. The children are savagery and they even tell him that "we want you to die" (Theroux, 2012, p. 176). When the children fight over donations from foreign agencies, Hock realises that he was on a different planet (Theroux, 2012, p. 189). This realization that he was on a different planet negates Africa from

Earth and sets it off as an alien place whose inhabitants are alien and may not be fully human.

In his review of the novel in an essay titled "Seriously, a Closer Look", Alfred Msadala (2015) makes the same observation of Theroux's work presenting Africa as the Other of Europe. He argues:

> The presentation of the story paints a picture that is completely out of this region. The way the natives behave, even with the worst scenario of the pandemic, is exaggerated. It is all very well to look at situations analytically but this is more judgemental. The outlook in the setting has been generalized from extremism. (Msadala, 2015, p. 8)

The images of Africa and Africans that we find in *The Lower River* are arguably stereotypical and serve to perpetuate Western ideas about Africa prevalent in their colonizing discourse. In her article, "Racism, Imperialism, and the Traveller's Gaze in Eighteenth-Century England", Margaret Hunt recalls the list of traits of Africans produced by Edward Long in the 18th century. In his influential apologia for slavery, Long stated that "Africans were a brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious people" (Hunt, 1993, p. 339). This is the image of Africans that Theroux portrays in *The Lower River* when describing the people whom his protagonist meets in Malabo, a village in Nsanje district on the southern tip of Malawi.

As Kevin Dunn (2004) rightly puts it, "among the dominant discourses, it is clear that Africa is often presented as an exoticised destination in which to see and consume both 'nature' and the 'native'" (p. 487). He regards this disposition as being informed by and built upon colonial travel narratives and tropes and that it "entails the practice of commodifying Africa and marketing it for Western consumption" (Dunn, 2004, p. 487). He concludes by saying that, in the case of the traveller's experience, "the traveller's understanding is shaped by the dominant discourses, narratives, and representations in circulation within their historically – specific social context" (Dunn, 2004, p. 487). This is why I argue that Theroux's narrative seeks to construct an image of Africa for the consumption of Western audiences who already exist in an ideological space

that has distorted perspectives of Africa as a primitive space. This becomes the fundamental problem with Theroux's travel novel.

Conclusion: A need to re-tell the tale

The message in *The Lower River* is not something that one expects to read in contemporary literature, bearing in mind the gravity of such misrepresentations of Africa in the modernised global village. Theroux's novel reconstructs the Western colonizing discourse of Orientalism to the detriment of cordial co-existence between Africa and the West. Such distorted visions of Africa as the Other world and Africans as the Other people go a long way in shaping mindsets and misconceptions, especially among those who have not travelled to the continent. For instance, Perry Hicks and Barry Beyer (1970) recount a study conducted in 1967 by Project Africa, which revealed that,

> To American seventh and twelfth graders, Africa south of the Sahara appears as a primitive, backward, underdeveloped land with no history – a hot, strange land of jungles and deserts, populated with wild animals such as elephants, tigers, and snakes, and by black naked savages, cannibals, and pygmies. Missionaries and witchdoctors vie for control of the natives, who live in villages, are prone to superstition and disease, and who hunt with spears and poison darts when not sitting in front of their huts beating on drums. (Hicks and Beyer, 1970, p. 160)

This is the image of Africa that mostly exists in the Western imagination and novels like *The Lower River* serve to satisfy that imagination.

It is only necessary for African intellectuals to challenge such representations of Africa and to re-write the travel tale in order to tell the story of Africa correctly. This is where the project of decolonization begins. The persistence of negative images of Africa in Western writing only goes to show that the fight against racism and imperialism is still on going and that the project of re-reading and re-writing the African account does not end with the official end of colonialism.

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